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A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE GRAVEL PIT MEETING,
IN HACKNEY,

April 6, 1794.

PUBLISHED by the AUTHOR,

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AND, PREPARING FOR THE PRESS,

LECTURES *on* LOGIC, *and the* PHILOSOPHY *of the* HUMAN MIND.

2

Diſhoneſt Shame the primary Source of the Corruptions of the Chriſtian Doctrine.

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE GRAVEL PIT MEETING, IN HAKCNEY.

April 6, 1794.

By THOMAS BELSHAM.

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1794.

BRITISH MUSEUM

TO THE CONGREGATION

ASSEMBLING AT

THE - GRAVEL - PIT - MEETING,

IN HACKNEY.

THE FOLLOWING DISCOURSE,

COMPOSED FOR THEIR USE,

AND

PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST,

IS

RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED

BY

THEIR AFFECTIONATE FRIEND,

AND

OBEDIENT SERVANT,

The AUTHOR.

A SERMON.

ROMANS i. 16.

I am not aſhamed of the Goſpel OF CHRIST. *

IT is a circumſtance highly favourable to the chriſtian religion that it was originally promulgated, and has been uſually profeſſed in circumſtances which ſubjected it to the moſt rigorous examination. The pure, uncorrupted doctrine of Chriſt has ſeldom been the road to affluence and eaſe, and has more frequently expoſed its profeſſors to contempt and perſecution; ſo that nothing could have ſupported it in the world but that irreſiſtible force of evidence which to a ſerious and well-diſpoſed mind outweighs every ſecular conſideration, which will ſtand the teſt of ſevere enquiry, and which cannot fail to enſure the permanent exiſtence, and the ultimate univerſal reception of the chriſtian revelation.

* Theſe words *(of Chriſt)* are wanting in the Alexandrian, Ephrem, Clermont, and other manuſcripts, and in many of the ancient verſions; and they are omitted in Grieſbach's edition of the Greek Teſtament, and in Mr. Wakefield's tranſlation.

When chriſtianity was firſt promulgated in the world, nothing could exceed the contempt which was laviſhed both upon the doctrine and its publiſhers. To the boaſting jew who regarded himſelf as the peculiar favourite of heaven, and who expected the appearance of a mighty conqueror in the clouds to deliver his nation from the Roman yoke, and to raiſe it to a pre-eminence above the ſurrounding peoples, nothing could be more mortifying than the doctrine of a crucified Meſſiah, or that the merciful parent of the univerſe had declared himſelf equally favourable to the deſpiſed gentile, as to the privileged deſcendant of Abraham. Theſe, therefore, were every where the firſt to cry out againſt the daring innovators who preſumed to ſet aſide a law which God himſelf had eſtabliſhed, and to expoſe the vanity of thoſe phariſaic rites and traditions by which hypocrites hoped to recommend themſelves to God, while they neglected the practice of virtue. The chriſtian religion met with ſimilar treatment from the gentiles, when it became ſufficiently conſiderable by the number of its converts, and ſufficiently diſtinguiſhable from judaiſm to attract their attention. The popular recommendations of a religion to the heathen,

then, were a ſplendid ritual, a licentious worſhip, recondite antiquity, and a ſocial theology which admitted the different claims of different deities. The chriſtian religion was the reverſe of all this: it was *new*, and this was a ſufficient title to general contempt *. It was ſimple in its forms. It impoſed the ſtrongeſt reſtraints upon the appetites and paſſions; and the greateſt offence of all was, that this new religion, ſo far from contenting itſelf with an equal ſhare of reſpect in common with others, utterly diſclaimed all alliance with every other ſyſtem, and, from its firſt promulgation, avowed, as its main object, the entire overthrow of all the ancient idolatries, and the univerſal eſtabliſhment of the worſhip of the one true and living God. A project apparently ſo extravagant excited general contempt and ridicule, while at the ſame time an attack ſo bold and unprovoked upon ancient, eſtabliſhed, and, as many no doubt pretended to think them, *uſeful prejudices*, entailed

* Afflicti ſuppliciis chriſtiani genus hominum ſuperſtitionis *novæ* et maleficæ. Suetonius Vit. Neron.

That antiquity was a great recommendation to any religious ſyſtem, appears from what Tacitus ſays of the jewiſh ritual, Hi ritus quoquo modo inducti, *antiquitate* defenduntur. Tac. Hiſt. L. v.

tailed upon the chriſtians the charge of being enemies to the human race, and was thought to juſtify the ſevereſt perſecution †.

The objections of the learned men, and philoſophers of the age, were of a different nature. They ſought after wiſdom. They required ſome abſtruſe metaphyſical theory, patronized by ſome philoſopher of renown, ſupported by ſubtle and refined reaſoning, and embelliſhed with elegant language. They ſcorned a philoſophy, the founder of which was a crucified jew, the principal doctrine of which, the reſurrection of the dead, was in their eſtimation moſt undeſirable, and palpably abſurd, and the proof of which reſted not on logical deductions, but on plain facts reported by plain unlettered men, to which they conceived it a derogation from their philoſophical dignity to pay the leaſt attention.

That any perſons ſhould have embraced the chriſtian religion under ſuch diſadvantages, is a ſtrong preſumptive evidence of its truth. If the firſt chriſtians were men of like paſſions with ourſelves,

† This probably is the meaning of Tacitus, when he repreſents the chriſtians as convicted of hating the whole human race, (odio humani generis convicti ſunt) Ann. L. xv.

ourſelves, they muſt have had the moſt powerful motives to enquire rigorouſly into the truth of the facts upon which chriſtianity reſts, and nothing but the moſt irreſiſtible evidence could have induced them to have made a public profeſſion of a religion which expoſed them to ſuch manifeſt inconvenience and diſgrace.

The public contempt and odium entailed upon the chriſtian name prevented the majority from enquiring into the truth of the chriſtian religion, and diſcouraged others from a public profeſſion of it who were inwardly convinced of its divine original. It alſo proved a temptation to many of its avowed advocates to introduce corruptions into chriſtianity, and to accommodate the doctrines of the goſpel to their own preconceived opinions, and to the prejudices of their unbelieving neighbours.

Many of the jewiſh converts not only retained their attachment to the moſaic ritual, which was at leaſt excuſable, if not juſtifiable, as long as the temple ſervice continued, but they ſtrenuouſly inſiſted upon impoſing the yoke of the ceremonial law upon the converted gentiles, and abſolutely refuſed to hold communion with thoſe who were not initiated into the jewiſh religion,

ligion, which they repreſented as eſſential to ſalvation. By this conduct they gratified their own prejudices, and leſſened the odium attached to the profeſſion of chriſtianity by paſſing it off as a jewiſh ſect. And ſo far was this temporizing ſpirit carried, that even Peter and Barnabas were led aſtray by it, though the latter, by expreſs direction from heaven, had been engaged with the apoſtle Paul in a ſucceſsful miſſion among the gentiles; and the former had been taught, by a miraculous viſion, to call nothing common or unclean. This was the chief difficulty which Paul, the apoſtle of the gentiles, encountered in the diſcharge of his miniſtry. Wherever he caſt the good ſeed of the word, theſe jewiſh zealots conſtantly followed him, and ſowed tares among the wheat. Wherever he erected the ſtandard of goſpel liberty, there they laboured, and often too ſucceſsfully, to introduce the fetters of ſuperſtition, and to ſubject the young and unſtable convert to a yoke of intolerable bondage. Upon ſome future occaſion it may perhaps come in our way to enquire how this violent oppoſition to the doctrine of the apoſtle adds tenfold weight to the exiſting evidences of the chriſtian religion. It is ſufficient for the preſent to remark, that it

gave

gave occaſion to the apoſtle to write moſt of thoſe epiſtles which are now extant under his name, and which, though never received by the narrow-ſpirited jewiſh chriſtians, were held in ſuch high eſtimation by the gentile converts, that they entirely cloſed the controverſy, of which no farther mention appears to be made after the firſt century.

Of the gentiles who embraced the chriſtian religion in the apoſtolic age, ſome endeavoured to leſſen the odium which they incurred, by aſſociating the chriſtian worſhip with that of idols. While at one time they celebrated the chriſtian feſtival in commemoration of the death of Chriſt, at another they feaſted in an idol's temple upon ſacrifices which had been offered to heathen deities. This cuſtom is ſeverely cenſured by Paul in his epiſtle to the Corinthians, as militating directly againſt the firſt principle of the chriſtian religion, which allowed of no intercommunity with heathen gods. Ye cannot drink, ſaith he, of the cup of the Lord, and of the cup of demons; ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of demons; (1 Cor. x. 21.)

But

But the grand reproach of chriſtianity was, that the founder of this new doctrine was a crucified jew. This was the ſtanding topic of deriſion and inſult. The croſs of Chriſt was to the Jews a ſtumbling-block, and to the Greeks fooliſhneſs. The founders of all other religions were legiſlators or conquerors, men who ranked high in the eſtimation of the world. The chriſtian religion, this new and obnoxious doctrine, the profeſſed object of which was the utter overthrow and annihilation of all the exiſting idolatries and ſuperſtitions, was the only one which derived its origin from ſo mean, and, as was commonly thought, ſo infamous a ſource. Of this ſuppoſed diſgrace the chriſtian philoſophers, (and ſome ſuch there were even in the apoſtolic age, pretenders to ſcience falſely ſo called,) unhappily for the chriſtian religion, were exceedingly anxious to clear the new philoſophy which they had embraced.

The firſt invention which was introduced into chriſtianity to obviate this odium, was borrowed from the oriental philoſophy, the profeſſors of which dignified it with the name of knowledge,

knowlege, (γνωσις) and arrogated to themſelves the proud title of *the men of ſcience* ‡. Theſe philoſophers, ſome of whom made profeſſion of the chriſtian religion, pretended that Jeſus was a man only in appearance, and that he only *ſeemed* to ſuffer, but did not really endure any pain. Others again maintained, that the Chriſt was a celeſtial ſpirit, who entered into the man Jeſus at his baptiſm, and deſerted him upon the croſs; ſo that though the *man* ſuffered, the *Chriſt* was impaſſible. Theſe fancies, ſo evidently ſubverſive of the main deſign of the chriſtian revelation, were zealouſly oppoſed and ſtrongly reprobated by the apoſtle John, who in his goſpel, but eſpecially in his epiſtles, expreſſes in a great variety of phraſe the reality of the perſon and ſufferings of Jeſus Chriſt, and brands the broachers of the oppoſite doctrine with the name and character of antichriſt. That, ſays he, which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have ſeen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and OUR HANDS HAVE HANDLED, of the word of life; that

‡ γνωστικοι, gnoſtics. For an account of the principles of the gnoſtics, ſee Dr. Prieſtley's Hiſtory of early Opinions; Vol. I. B. 1. C. 3.

that which we have ſeen and heard, declare we unto you; (1 John i. 1, 2.) And again, Hereby know ye the ſpirit of God; every ſpirit that confeſſeth that Jeſus Chriſt is *come in the fleſh*, i. e. that he is a real perſon, is of God; and every ſpirit that confeſſeth not that *Jeſus Chriſt is come in the fleſh*, i. e. who denies that he is a real perſon, is not of God; and this is that ſpirit of antichriſt whereof you have heard that it ſhould come, and even now already is it in the world; (1 John, iv. 2, 3.) And again, in his ſecond epiſtle, Many deceivers are entered into the world who confeſs not that Jeſus Chriſt is *come in the fleſh*; this is a deceiver and antichriſt; (2 John, 7.)

The philoſophers of the Weſt were as unwilling to avow themſelves the diſciples of a crucified man as thoſe of the Eaſt: and various were the inventions which they deviſed to rid the chriſtian ſyſtem of this ſuppoſed incumbrance, and to exalt the founder of this new religion to a rank equal, if not ſuperior to the greateſt heroes and gods of the old ſuperſtition.

The firſt fiction, for this purpoſe, was

that of his miraculous conception and birth.* After this, a platonic philoſo-

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pher

* That the introductory chapters to the hiſtories of Matthew and Luke, which contain an account of the miraculous conception of Jeſus, are ſpurious, and that the whole ſtory is a fiction, has been ſufficiently proved by Dr. Prieſtley, in his Hiſtory of Early Opinions, vol. iv. book iii. by Mr. Pope, in his Letters to Mr. Niſbett, and by Mr. Evanſon, in his Diſſonance of the Evangeliſts, p. 32---57: To which I beg leave to add another argument, which to me ſeems deciſive, though it has eſcaped the attention of thoſe ſagacious critics. It appears from Luke iii. 1, 23, that Jeſus was entering upon the thirtieth year of his age, (ην ο Ιησους ωσει ετων τριακοντα αρχομενος) in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Cæſar, and conſequently that he was born fifteen years before the death of Auguſtus which happened Aug. 19, A. U. C. 767. Jeſus therefore was born A. U. C. 752. But Herod was certainly dead in April, A. U. C. 751, and probably the year before, (vide Lardner's Works, v. 1, p. 423---428.) The account therefore in the introductory chapters to Matthew and Luke, which ſuppoſes Herod to have lived a conſiderable time after the birth of Jeſus, muſt be untrue. The miſerable ſhifts to which harmonizers have been reduced to reconcile theſe contradictions, are well known to perſons converſant in theſe enquiries.

That the introductions to Matthew and Luke were *early* forgeries, is evident from their being found in all our preſent manuſcripts and verſions. That the account of the miraculous conception of Jeſus was a fabrication of the weſt, is plain from its early and general reception in the

weſtern

pher†, of great integrity, but little judgment, having embraced chriſtianity, fancied himſelf inſpired with ſupernatural ſkill to interpret the ſcriptures of the Old Teſtament, and to teach that the power and wiſdom of God, by

weſtern churches, while it was diſputed by the jewiſh chriſtians, who could have had no antecedent prejudices againſt it, and rejected by the gnoſtics, though peculiarly favorable to their theological ſyſtem. Prieſtley's Hiſtory of Opinions, v. iv. p. 63.

But though this ſtory is found in all our preſent copies of Matthew and Luke, it was certainly wanting in ſome of the ancient ones. The introduction to Matthew was wanting in the copies uſed by the jewiſh chriſtians, and that to the goſpel of Luke in the copies of Marcion. It is true the orthodox charge the heretics with corrupting the text, but the hereties were not behind-hand in retorting the charge upon the orthodox church. Funis ergo ducendus eſt contentionis, pari hinc inde niſu fluctuante. Ego meum dico verum, Marcion ſuum. Ego Marcionis adfirmo adulteratum, Marcion meum. Quis inter nos determinabit, &c. Such is the honeſt confeſſion of Tertullian. Adverſus Marcion. L. 4, c. 3.

† Juſtin Martyr, who flouriſhed, A. D. 140. See the evidence of this curious fact, viz. That Juſtin was the inventor of the doctrine of Chriſt's pre-exiſtence, and that he fancied himſelf inſpired to interpret the ſcriptures of the Old Teſtament, in favour of this new opinion, exhibited in Mr. Lindſey's Addreſs to the Youth of the two Univerſities, part ii. chap. iv. § 14---16.

by which the world was made, and the jewiſh law delivered from mount Sinai, were perſonified, and reſided in the man Chriſt Jeſus. This was a notion which long prevailed amongſt philoſophizing chriſtians; though it does not appear that the unlearned profeſſors of chriſtianity in general either reliſhed or underſtood it*. Some time afterwards, another able diſputant† con-

 tended

* Of this fact Dr. Prieſtley has produced ample proof, in the third volume of his Hiſtory of Early Opinions. Amongſt the numerous teſtimonies to this effect, none is more direct and unanſwerable than that of Tertullian, Simplices enim quippe, ne dixerim imprudentes et idiotæ, *quæ major ſemper credentium pars eſt*—Numerum et diſpoſitionem Trinitatis, diviſionem præſumunt Unitatis—Itaque *duos* et *tres* jam jactitant a nobis prædicari, ſe vero *unius Dei* cultores præſumunt——Monarchiam inquiunt tenemus—Monarchiam ſonare ſtudent Latini, oeconomiam intelligere nolunt etiam Græci.

Ad Praxeam, Sec. 3. P. 502.

† Arius, a preſbyter of Alexandria, A.D. 315. whom Socrates deſcribes as (ανηρ ουκ αμοιρος της διαλεκτικης ισχυος) a man well verſed in logical ſubtilties. Alexander, biſhop of Alexandria, aſſerted upon a certain occaſion, in the preſence of his preſbyters, that there was a *monad* in the trinity (εν τριαδι μοναδα ειναι). This doctrine Arius oppoſed as bordering upon Sabellianiſm, and in the heat of controverſy advanced the new opinion that the ſon of God was a creature made out of nothing, mutable, falli-

ble,

tended, that the being who inhabited the body of Chriſt was the firſt of created ſpirits, brought into exiſtence for the ſole purpoſe of being the inſtrument of God in the formation and government of the univerſe. In oppoſition to this new doctrine, which, at its firſt appearance, excited a general alarm in the chriſtian world, it was ſtrenuouſly affirmed that the ſon of God was *co-eternal* and *co-eſſential* with the father*—afterwards, that though neceſſarily derived from him, he was in all other reſpects equal to him, ſo that *neither was before or after the other, neither was greater or leſs than the other*†, —and laſtly, that, like the father, he was original, underived, eſſentially perfect, and immutable. Such was the progreſs of thoſe corruptions

ble, and peccable, and brought into the exiſtence for no other purpoſe but to be the inſtrument of God in making the world. (και ουκ αν υπεςη, ει μη ημας ο Θεος ηθελεν ποιησαι) This novel doctrine was ſo offenſive to the pious biſhop of Alexandria, who excommunicated his preſbyter and all his adherents upon the occaſion, that he declares all former hereſies to have been innocent in compariſon with this. See his epiſtle to the churches in vindication of the Council, which depoſed Arius and his aſſociates, in Socrates Eccl. Hiſt. L. i. C. 6.

* This was the doctrine of the famous Council of Nice, held A. D. 325.

† The doctrine of the Athanaſian Creed, ſuſpected by many to have been forged by Vigilius Tapſenſis, in the latter

ruptions of the chriſtian doctrine concerning the perſon of Chriſt, which originated in a falſe and unworthy ſhame of being the diſciples ot a crucified man, and which to this day overſpread the greater part of what is called the Chriſtian Church, deform and diſgrace the chriſtian religion, and expoſe it to the contempt and ridicule of intelligent unbelievers.

Such were the baneful conſequences of being aſhamed of Chriſt and of his words at the firſt promulgation of the chriſtian doctrine, and this was the character of too many, who, though unable to reſiſt the evidences of the chriſtian faith, were nevertheleſs willing to eſcape the odium and perſecution attached to the profeſſion of chriſtianity, by accommodating it as much as poſſible to the views and prejudices of their unbelieving neighbours. But to this temporizing and cowardly ſpirit there were many honourable exceptions, of which the text exhibits one of the moſt ſtriking and illuſtrious.

We have here an example of a man of talents, a man of education and letters, a man of rank and conſideration in his own country, (to which

latter end of the fifth century. The ſame perſon is alſo ſuſpected to have been the author of the famous text, 1 John v. 7. concerning the heavenly witneſſes, he being the firſt writer who directly cites it.

Vid. Grieſbach in loc.

his following the occupation of a tent maker is by no means an objection, it being well known that all profeſſional men among the Jews were inſtructed in ſome manual art), a perſon who was by deſcent a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and by birth a citizen of Rome, who in an epiſtle addreſſed to the inhabitants of the firſt city in the world, ſets out with the frank and ingenuous declaration, " I am not aſhamed of the goſpel."

Nor was this an empty boaſt.—The whole hiſtory of this apoſtle, as far as it can be collected from the writings of Luke, his companion and friend, and from his own epiſtles, demonſtrates that his generous and liberal mind was a ſtranger to the influence of this mean and unworthy paſſion.

He was not aſhamed of declaring to his own countrymen, in the plaineſt language, the very obnoxious doctrine of a crucified Meſſiah, opening and alledging from their own ſcriptures that Chriſt muſt needs have ſuffered and riſen from the dead, and that this *Jeſus, whom*, ſays he, *I preach unto you is the Chriſt*, (Acts xvii. 3.). He boldly aſſerted the liberty of gentile converts, in oppoſition to judaizing zealots to whom he *gave place by ſubjection not even* for an *hour*, and he ſcrupled not publicly to rebuke the

apoſtle

apoſtle Peter, at Antioch, for his temporizing ſpirit in withdrawing from the ſociety of gentile chriſtians, (Gal. ii. 11.), leſt he ſhould give offence to ſome narrow ſpirited jews. And though he touches upon the ſubject with a delicacy and reluctance, which plainly proves it to have been a very painful one, yet he heſitates not to denounce the rejection of his countrymen becauſe of their unbelief, and the admiſſion of all believers, whether jew or gentile into that ſtate of privilege, which was once limited to the choſen deſcendants of Abraham.

To the idolatrous gentile he plainly announces the neceſſity of turning from dumb idols to ſerve the living and the true God. He ſtrictly prohibits aſſociating idolatrous rites with the profeſſion of chriſtianity, and requires them to abſtain from all doubtful acts which had an appearance of joining in idol worſhip, and which might miſlead the unwary, even though as to themſelves the action might be innocent. He alſo repeatedly and ſtrongly inſiſts upon the purity of the chriſtian character, and pointedly reprobates thoſe abominable practices which were not only tolerated by, but which often conſtituted an eſſential part of the heathen idolatry.

To the philoſophers he is not aſhamed of exhibiting chriſtianity as a ſyſtem of the ſublimeſt

philoſophy, and which alone merited the name of wiſdom. Without heſitation or fear, he advances the moſt obnoxious truths. To the inquiſitive and ſcornful Athenians he preaches, what to them appeared the moſt extravagant doctrine, viz. that God would judge the world in righteouſneſs by the man whom he had ordained, of which he had given aſſurance to all men by raiſing him from the dead, (Acts xvii. 31.). To the rude charge of inſanity from the philoſophic governor Feſtus, who ridiculed the angry diſcuſſion of what he thought an idle queſtion, (Acts xxv. 19.), he replies with temper and firmneſs, alledging that the facts he relates were of public notoriety, and appealing to the governor's noble aſſeſſor and friend to bear teſtimony to their truth. (Acts xxvi. 24.). To the poliſhed and diſputatious Corinthians, he diſclaims all pretenſions to eloquence, and to refined ſubtilities of argument, and reſts the evidence of his new philoſophy upon an appeal to incontrovertible fact. (1. Cor. ii. 1.). Laſtly, ſo far from concealing or palliating the ignominious execution of the firſt founder of the chriſtian religion, he avows the fact as an eſſential part of the plan of divine providence in introducing chriſtianity into the world, and he triumphs

triumphs in being the diſciple of the crucified Nazarene. God forbid ſaid he that I ſhould glory ſave in the croſs of the Lord Jeſus Chriſt. (Gal. vi. 14.). And when he entered upon his miniſtry among the Corinthians it was with this fixed reſolution, that he would know nothing among them but Jeſus Chriſt, even him that was crucified. (1. Cor. ii. 2.). As though he had ſaid, that whatever ſyſtems others might adopt, to whatever teachers they might adhere, and whoſe name ſoever they might chuſe to bear, for his part he would acknowledge no other teacher, he would ſubmit to no other maſter, he would bear no other name than that of Jeſus Chriſt, the crucified jew.

Such was the firm and manly character of the apoſtle, who having embraced the chriſtian religion under a clear conviction of its truth and divine authority, was aſhamed neither of the maſter whom he ſerved, nor of the doctrine he taught, and who ſcorned to debaſe the purity of the goſpel by a mean and temporiſing ſpirit.

There is my friends a great ſimilarity between the ſtate of genuine chriſtianity at preſent and that of the chriſtian religion at its firſt promulgation; and if we are not reſolutely and continually upon our guard, we are in immi-

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nent danger of falling into that fault which was the ſnare of ſo many of the primitive chriſtians, of being aſhamed of the goſpel.

Not that in the preſent times it is any diſgrace to make a public general profeſſion of faith in the chriſtian religion, and to affect wonderful zeal for what are often called its *peculiar doctrines* in oppoſition to heretics, philoſophers, and atheiſts. This we know is practiſed every day by numbers who are hoſtile to the genuine truths of the chriſtian religion, who are ſtrangers to its ſpirit, who are infidels to its authority. A parade of zeal for chriſtianity is, if I may ſo expreſs it, the *cant* of the day, ſtudiouſly ſupported by the enemies of all religion, to impoſe upon the unthinking and the unwary, for the moſt unworthy purpoſes.

But if any one is ſuſpected of ſeriouſly believing the divine authority of the chriſtian revelation, many, who are loudeſt in their profeſſions of zeal for chriſtianity, will regard him with contempt as a perſon of mean underſtanding, and exceſſive credulity, in giving credit to a fiction which is kept in countenance for no other purpoſe than to awe the vulgar. If ſuch a perſon ſeparates from the ſtate religion, for grave and conſcientious reaſons, he is re-

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preſented as a weak enthuſiaſt, and is fortunate if he eſcapes the cenſure of diſaffection and diſloyalty. If by diligent ſtudy of the ſcriptures and of the hiſtory of the chriſtian church, he has detected ſome of the corruptions which diſgrace the chriſtian religion, and has reformed his creed more nearly to the apoſtolic ſtandard, an outcry is immediately raiſed that he is ſtripping chriſtianity of its moſt eſſential doctrines, and that a religion ſo plain and ſimple is neither worthy of God to impart, nor of men to accept. But if in addition to this a perſon diſcovers any degree of zeal to promote what he ſeriouſly believes to be important truths, and to oppoſe prevailing errors, he immediately becomes the object of general reproach; and it often happens that his luke-warm brethren, from whom a ſimilarity of principles might naturally lead him to expect encouragement and ſupport, are the firſt to upbraid his intrepidity in the cauſe of truth.

How great then is the temptation to which we are expoſed of being aſhamed of Chriſt and his religion, and of adopting the miſerable temporiſing maxim, *to think with the wiſe, and to ſpeak with the vulgar*, a maxim readily admitted by thoſe who prefer indolence and eaſe to the

the practice of duty, when attended with inconvenience and hazard, but rejected with contempt by every honeſt, firm, and benevolent mind. And you my friends have not ſo learned Chriſt. You have not been taught either by the doctrine or example of your late excellent inſtructors * to be aſhamed of your chriſtian profeſſion.

And why ſhould we be aſhamed? What is there in chriſtianity itſelf, or in our own peculiar principles and profeſſion which ſhould excite a bluſh?

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* Dr. Price, and Dr. Prieſtley: the former of whom cloſed in peace his virtuous and patriotic career before the ſtorm burſt which has involved Europe in calamity and blood, and this country in diſtreſs and alarm. The latter, the firſt of experimental philoſophers, metaphyſicians, and divines, a man of the moſt vigorous and comprehenſive mind, the moſt benevolent heart, the gentleſt manners, and the moſt exemplary character, is driven, in the decline of life, by the ſpirit of the times, at the cloſe of the eighteenth century, to ſeek a refuge on the ſhores of America. A fact which enlightened poſterity will with difficulty credit, and which every friend of his country, who feels a true concern for its honour, will wiſh blotted from its annals, when the paroxyſm of paſſion is paſt, and the ſeaſon of calm and ſober reflexion returns.

Let us examine freely.—If the chriſtian religion will not ſtand the ſcrutiny, let us diſcard it as an impious forgery. If our principles will not bear ſtrict examination let us, without heſitation, renounce them, and bleſs the means by which our errors have been corrected, and our underſtandings enlightened in moral and religious truth.

We believe that Jeſus Chriſt was ſent to reveal the doctrine of a future life; that he confirmed his miſſion by his miracles; that he was publicly put to death as a malefactor; that he demonſtrated and exemplified the leading doctrine of his religion by his own reſurrection from the grave, by which he was declared to be the ſon of God, the firſt begotten from the dead, the prince and leader of life; that he aſcended into Heaven; that he commiſſioned his apoſtles to publiſh his goſpel to the world; that for this purpoſe he qualified them with miraculous gifts and powers; in conſequence of which the doctrine of the goſpel made a rapid and extenſive progreſs in the world; that the ſucceſs of the chriſtian religion is a fact too notorious to admit of diſpute; that few have been hardy enough to call it in queſtion; that when doubts have been ſtarted no plauſible pretence for them has been produced; that no adequate cauſe has been or can be aſſigned

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for this extraordinary ſucceſs, but the truth of the chriſtian doctrines, and the reality of the miracles; that the zeal, the diſcipline, the faith, the rigid morals of the primitive chriſtians, which have been ſuggeſted as ſufficient to account for the multitude of converts, are themſelves the very effect, the cauſe of which is the ſubject of enquiry; and that if the miracles of the New Teſtament are denied, this faith, this zeal, this inflexible perſeverance of the firſt chriſtians can no way be accounted for but by a ſupernatural infatuation of thouſands of perſons of all ranks and deſcription, which would itſelf be a miracle, far more incredible than any recorded in the ſcriptures, and utterly unworthy of the wiſdom and benevolence of God. From this brief ſtate of the queſtion let reaſon and common ſenſe decide, whether the believer or the infidel has moſt cauſe for ſhame?

Having thus, after deliberate and impartial enquiry, accepted Chriſt as our maſter, it becomes our indiſpenſible duty to renounce all inferior authority in matters of faith, to ſtudy the doctrine of Chriſt with the utmoſt attention, to profeſs it with ſimplicity, to purify it as far as lies in our power from thoſe corruptions by which it is debaſed, and by which its further

progreſs in the world is impeded, regardleſs of human cenſure or applauſe, and fearleſs of all perſonal conſequences: knowing that if we ſuffer with him we ſhall alſo reign with him, but if we deny him, he alſo will deny us.

With theſe views my friends, and under theſe impreſſions, I have accepted your generous and unſolicited invitation to exerciſe the honourable office of a teacher of religion in this ſociety. Theſe are the motives with which, as rational and enlightened profeſſors of the chriſtian religion, you wiſh your miniſters to be animated; they were the principles that influenced my much revered predeceſſors, they are thoſe which animated the apoſtle Paul and the firſt teachers of the chriſtian religion. Under theſe impreſſions I ſhall think it my duty, in the courſe of my public ſervices, to inſtruct you to the beſt of my power in the chriſtian ſcriptures, to exhibit what appears to me to be the genuine doctrine of chriſtianity with plainneſs and ſincerity, to caution you againſt corrupting the ſimplicity of ſcripture truth by the tenets of a falſe philoſophy, and to enforce the practice of virtue upon evangelical principles, aiming at nothing but your inſtruction and edification. And while I freely

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declare, what appears to me to be important truth, I ſhall carefully refrain from all aſperity of language, and harſh reflection upon chriſtians of different ſentiments; not aſpiring to any dominion over your faith, and aſking no farther credit to the doctrines delivered, than as they may appear to be ſupported by ſound reaſon, and by the ſcripture properly explained and underſtood. And as to my younger friends, if they will favour me with a patient and candid attention, it will afford me peculiar pleaſure to aſſiſt them in forming thoſe conſiſtent and ſyſtematic views of the nature and evidences of religion, which may eſtabliſh their faith upon rational grounds, and make them chriſtians, not by education and prejudice alone, but upon conviction, after fair and impartial enquiry, which is the only proper foundation for ſtability of principle and character.

And while we are thus diligently availing ourſelves of the beſt means in our poſſeſſion for improving in the knowledge and practice of genuine chriſtianity, we may reaſonably hope, that in the uſual courſe of divine providence, our faithful exertions will be crowned with correſponding ſucceſs.

THE END.

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